

ESSAY

The world of Sarojini Naidu

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

A very interesting incident happened when Huxley attended another session of the Congress in Kanpur in December 1925. It was a mammoth gathering and people were made to sit on mats laid on the floor of the pandal. Huxley sat too and wrote in his book, "These nine fruitless hours of squatting on the floor were very nearly my last. By the time they were over, I was all but dead of sheer fatigue." At this session Mahatma Gandhi formally handed over charge to Sarojini, his successor. Once again her speech drew high acclamation from the audience as she spoke very substantively. Dr. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, the historian of the Congress commented, "Sarojini Naidu took charge with a few choice words. Her presidential address was perhaps the shortest delivered from the Congress rostrum, while of course, it was the sweetest ever delivered....."

There was huge coverage of her ascending to the presidency of the Congress both at home and abroad. The *New York Times* described her as "Joan of Arc who rose to inspire India", "Darling of English Society" and "The first high-born Brahmin girl to break with the strict tradition of veil and caste who returned home, and obtained the support of the progressive Nizam." Her mannerisms during the time she delivered her presidential address were also highly lauded. Sengupta remarks, "The whole session was a tremendous success, thanks to one dynamic woman." In 1928-29 she travelled to America and Canada as the representative of Mahatma Gandhi and won the hearts of all.

Helen Reed of Montreal, Canada, wrote in *Young India*, published on February 7, 1929, on Sarojini's visit to Canada. "You, who so well know her wide range of thought and experience, her poetic expression in both word and voice, her humour, her rich and happy use of our English language -- you cannot picture the surprise, the amazement deepening gradually and inevitably into admiration, the quickening mental challenge which she brought out on that occasion!" Her third book of poetry, *The Broken Wing*, "gave Miss Reed a 'shock of delight'." Another unofficial ambassador to America at the time when Sarojini was touring America and Canada was C.F. Andrews, who wrote elaborately to Mahatma Gandhi on Sarojini's achievement as she travelled across America. There was nothing but praise showered on her and thus India with its ancient civilization shone once again before distant people. On her return to India, Mahatma Gandhi commented that the Nightingale of India or Bharat Kokila, as he called her, was back after conquering the bigger world and now it remained to be seen how much of her

effort was actually implemented.

No matter how intensely Sarojini Naidu was occupied with politics both within India and in relation to the British rulers, she found time to say a few poetic words, recite a poem, take a break from the hullabaloo of politics and attend a session of ghazals and nazms. She would love to listen to Hindi and Urdu poets and attend Moshairas. On one such occasion, amidst the uproar of the First World War approaching, at Anand Bhaban, she read out her poem, *The Illusion of Love*, which she considered her best to her friend, Prof. Amarnath Jha taken from her book *The Broken*



Emperor Shah Jahan

Wing:

Beloved, you may be as all men say
Only a transient spark
Of flickering flame in a lamp of clay-
I care not ... since you kindle all my dark
With the immortal lustre of the day.
And as all men deem, dearest, you may be
Only a common shell
Chanc - winnowed by the sea - winds from the sea-
I care not ... since you make most audible
The subtle murmur of eternity.
And tho' you are, like men of mortal race,
Only a helpless thing
That death may mar and destiny efface-
I care not ... since unto my heart you bring

The very vision of God's dwelling place.

Poetry and things that are beautiful would give her peace from the stress and strain of politics. She would take refuge in them as her balm in order to re-energize herself to move forward with the ultimate goal the path of which was never smooth. On top of all these, she had her quick wit and humour to fit any occasion that refreshed not only those who heard it but also herself. She enjoyed the company of the young children and cracked jokes with them. She said, "Life must be worth living, and the young sustain me." As Gandhiji and Sarojini Naidu arrived in England to attend the Second Round Table Conferences held in 1931, both the leaders got a warm reception. John Hayne Holmes, author of *My Gandhi*, published in 1954, described Sarojini Naidu as the "greatest Indian woman." He says further, as she entered the hall "and strode to her place and received the rapturous acclaim of this crowded assemblage of Englishmen and women, one instructively felt as though we were looking upon a queen." He comments, "Any list of Gandhi's friends and colleagues would be incomplete without mention of Mme. Sarojini Naidu, the greatest of Indian women. In her we find a perfect illustration of Gandhi's power to capture the souls of men, and bind them to him with bonds not of steel but of the spirit." Thus praises for her coming from various quarters were profuse where such people themselves were all illustrious in various fields of their careers.

Between 1944 and 1947, she made many visits to Bengal, the main reason being that she was not keeping well and her doctor BC Roy lived in Calcutta. Still in the midst of her sufferings, she would not lose her sense of humour and enliven every moment of her interaction with people, having "... the amazing ability to fit into any age group", says SK Sen -- her other doctor. Among other things, Dr Sen talks about Sarojini's fondness for good food. She would ask a friend, "to take her out for a second meal after some formal dinner which she described as 'terrible'." She could talk about herself as the 'Governess' of the UP in a lighter vein when she became its governor. The same voice soared in eloquence as she addressed the Asian Relations Conference, "... whatever your creed, whatever your faith, whatever your tongue, remember there is no birth, there is no death, we move onward and onward, higher and higher till we attain the stars. Let us move on to the stars. We will forbid us and say 'halt, thus far and no further' We do not cry for the moon. We pluck it from the skies and wear it upon the diadem of Asia's freedom."

Sarojini's bantering would not subside even

when the British Governor of the UP, Sir Francis Wylie, wrote to her, the Governor-designate: "I am waiting to hand over. When are you arriving?" She replied as was her wont, "I shall come with a note book and pencil to learn the art of administration from you." She proved herself to be an exceptional governor in free India. People found her simple, full of human qualities, kind and approachable compared to the British Governor. At this stage, she often called herself *she-lat* (lady governor).

An enormous task fell on Sarojini when on January 30, 1948. Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead and Allahabad was "the main place for the immersion ceremony" of Gandhiji's ashes for pure religious purposes. Overwhelmed by the brutality of the act and still in shock, she made all arrangements for the ceremony. On Gandhiji's death, Alan Campbell-Johnson says in his book *Mission with Mountbatten*, "Nearly every Congress leader has spoken, several with outstanding eloquence and with an astonishing mastery of the purest English prose. Among the thoughts and phrases that have remained in my mind was Sarojini Naidu's assertion, 'It is therefore right and appropriate that he died in the City of Kings', and her dramatic plea, 'My father, do not rest. Do not allow us to rest, keep us to our pledge."

All her life, Sarojini felt that 'Mahatma Gandhi was a part of her life' yet she maintained her individuality in every external way of life. With the final decision to vivisect India, when Gandhiji was divested and forlorn, it was only Sarojini Naidu who could fathom his pain. As he was leaving for Bihar all alone, Sarojini wrote to him:

*Beloved Pilgrim,
You are, I learn, setting out once more on your
chosen Via Dolorosa in Bihar.*

*The way of sorrow for you may indeed be the way
of hope and solace for many millions of human
hearts. Blessed be your pilgrimage.*

*I am still incredibly weary or I should have
attempted to reach the Harijan Colony to bid you
farewell.*

*But even though I do not see you, you know that
my love is always with you -- and my faith.*

*Your Ammajan
Sarojini*

Exactly thirteen months after the death of her great master, the Bharat Kokila passed away. This passing away for her was "merely a process of passing into a higher and nobler life" as her father, her guru believed. All of India was in a state of shock, leaders were broken-hearted and the public in the deepest of sorrow. "The capital of the U.P. in one instant was stricken dumb. The other cities not only in the U.P. but throughout India, seemed paralysed." When she was brought into the north verandah of the

government house, Pandit Nehru was one of those who carried the bier. The government paid its tribute profusely by calling her "a brilliant orator, great poet, a person endowed with unusual charm and sense of humour as well as a genius in oratory, administrative skills and popular leadership."

Sarojini's own epitaph is most befitting of her own philosophy of life and death:

*Farewell, O eager faces that surround me,
Claiming my tender services of my days
Farewell, O joyous spirits that have bound me
With the love-sprinkled garlands of our praise.*

*O golden lamps of hope, how shall I bring you
life's kindling flame from a forsaken fire?*



Joan of Arc

*O glowing hearts of youth, how shall I sing you
Life's glorious message from a broken lyre?*

*To you what further homage shall I render,
Victorious city gilded by the sea,
Where breaks in surging tide of woe and splendour
The age-long tumult of humanity?*

*"Need you another tribute for a token
Who left from me the pride of all my years?
Lo! I will leave you with farewell unspoken,
Shrine of dead dreams! O temple of my tears!*

One wonders which is greater --- her work or she herself --- and finds an answer in Tagore's assertion in reference to Emperor Shahjahan, "But you are greater and nobler than your creation."

It is a living biography, as vibrant as the person whose life is portrayed here and along with it comes the full enactment of the struggle for the independence of India, fraught with known and unknown perils at every step of the

FICTION

. . . MIRROR . . .

ESHIKA AHMED

"WHO are you?"

I look at you, and you stare back at me with those bloodshot, drunk eyes. You smirk as you finger your messy clothes. I just stare as you lean forward. I follow your motion.

"Why, I am the monster you created..."

I continue to examine your appearance, weighing your words in my head. What did you mean? Is your current state really my fault?

You seem nonplussed about your current, shabby state. Your hair, once silky and healthy, now looks like the leaves of a malnourished bush. Dark circles below your eyes, accentuated by sallow skin - were you always so pale?

You seem skinnier than ever. Were you always so thin that it felt like you would fall over with the slightest nudge? I cannot even recall the smile you used to have - the genuine smile that came from your heart. Now, all that I hear from you are those bone-chilling, hollow laughs - laughter only because of the sound, and not the feeling involved - its coarse texture not bearing any of the smoothness it once possessed.

Your lips have become paler where they have not been burnt by cigarettes. The once-smooth texture is now a crumpled mess of dried-up skin which you bite on, making your lips bleed.

I feel dizzy all of a sudden. So I clutch the bath room counter for support. Splashing some cold water onto my face, I feel better. I look up at you again, water droplets rolling your

face, sitting on your eyelashes. You lick at your lip where you had initially broken the skin, trying to soothe the faint sting.

I tear my eyes away from you and look at the syringes and wide array of tablets on my counter. The tablets were in various shapes and sizes, the syringes used and empty. I open a cabinet, bring out a tiny bottle and fill a new syringe with some liquid from that bottle. As I inject myself with this drug, I feel much better. All those thoughts I had a while ago fade away. I look at you again.

Who said you look like a wreck? You are fine. You are still as you were, with a few differences here and there, but that does not count. You are happy, right? And that is all that matters.

Even if time was coming to an end for you, there was satisfaction. You feel sated, don't you? I feel sated. I feel elated. Like I could do no wrong.

I reached out to touch the smooth surface separating us. My fingertips meet yours as you mimic my movement. Are your fingers really that cold, or is it the mirror?

As I stare at you, and you look back at me with those bloodshot, drunk eyes, I realize you are my reflection.

"You are not the monster I created....rather, you are the monster that is in me..."

ESHIKA AHMED IS A YOUNG AND UPCOMING WRITER

LITERARY TRADITIONS

English in Malaysia and Singapore

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

In Malaysia, circumstances changed for writers in English at a precipitous rate as they were soon pushed to the margins of national culture. In 1966, Han Suyin optimistically defined Malaysian literature as "those writings (drama, novel, short story, play and verse), which by emotion, identification, description, social context and involvement relate to Malaysia... whether written in Malay, Chinese, Tamil or English." But such an inclusive vision of Malaysian literature proved too ambitious as many nationalists became increasingly vocal in their demand that the Malay language should be the only means of expression of Malaysia's national culture. While writers in English argued that a more appropriate path for building the nation was to work towards a Malaysian identity that would reflect the country's multi-ethnic background, writers in *bahasa* believed that the future citizenry should be moulded on Malaya's traditional culture and heritage, meaning Malay language and Malay culture.

A National Language Bill was passed in parliament on 3 March 1967 making Malay the national language. However, English could still be used in an official capacity, and teaching and learning other languages would be permitted. These decisions did not go down well with the non-Malay population who became increasingly disillusioned with the way the Alliance Government was running the country. This was reflected in the general elections held on 10 May 1969, in which the Alliance lost many seats in Parliament, from 89 seats won in 1964 to only 66 in 1969. It triggered the smouldering ethnic tensions which exploded into the violent race riots of 13 May 1969. Soon after the riots, Emergency was declared, the Constitution was suspended and power was handed over to the National Operations Council, headed by then Deputy Prime Minister, Abdul Razak (father of the present Prime Minister, Najib Tun Razak). This incident marks a watershed in language and literary development in the country, as it further strengthened the position of *bahasa* as the national language. Amendments were made in the Constitution to phase out all English-medium schools starting in 1970. Further amendments were introduced that made criticising special Malay rights, the privileges of the Malay royalty and the status of *Bahasa Melayu* (renamed Bahasa Malaysia) as the national language, an act of sedition. Literature and cultural policies were also adopted in a similar vein. In the sphere of culture it was decided that the national culture would be built on "Nusantara culture" with suitable elements of "immigrant cultures" in it. Literature was divided

into two categories. Since Malay was the national language, literature written in it also became the national literature. Writings in English, Chinese and Tamil were reduced to the status of "sectional literatures." Later, Ismail Hussein, then President of the Federation of National Writers (*Gabungan Penulis Nasional* or GAPENA), went on to dismiss literatures in English, Tamil and Chinese as "foreign literatures because they are written in non-indigenous languages" and could not be understood by everyone.

Such developments came as a mortifying blow to literary activities in English in Malaysia. Writers in English felt alienated and marginalised from the mainstream activity of nation building and the formation of national culture. Faced with such an adverse and invidious situation, some of the writers chose silence and others went into "voluntary exile." In 1969, Shirley Lim left the country for the US, initially for higher studies, but chose not to come back because she felt that the Language Act was "a more effective silencer than tanks and barbed-wire." Likewise, in 1975 Ee Tiang Hong left for Australia, believing that it was the only way out for him. He explained:

I left Malaysia then when I could no longer accept, intellectually or emotionally, the official and Malay definition of the Malaysian nation and culture.... I was convinced that I had no place in the new order of things, and not just as a writer but even as an ordinary citizen.... I left the country when I was finally convinced that the terms by which the nation was founded had been tampered with, that the nationalism in whose name Independence was secured, had taken a narrow turn, and that the very meaning of Malaysia had been altered.

Malaysian literature in English is recovering from this experience with the sprouting of young writers in the last fifteen years. The status of English has changed as it is more widely accepted as the language of business and commerce, and some emphasis has been put on the learning of English in "national" schools. This changed attitude to the language has brought encouragement for writers and, as a result, activities have picked up in recent years. Among the "older" writers, Wong Phui Nam, Salleh Ben Joned, K.S. Maniam and Kee Thuan Chye still remain active, and Shirley Lim continues to write from her exile home in the US. New writers have also come up, but the gravity of literary activity by Malaysian writers in English seems to have shifted outside the borders of Malaysia. Huzir Sulaiman and Farish Noor now live in Singapore, and Rani Manicka and Tash Aw, both of whom were nominated for the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, live in the UK. Some of the writers

who were born and brought up in Malaysia/Malaysia now live in Singapore and identify themselves as Singaporean writers, via Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim, Kirpal Singh and Leong Liew Geok.

Although there has been an influx of English language writers from Malaysia to Singapore, it has not happened the other way around. This is because the environment for writers in English in Singapore has been relatively more conducive and favourable. In a recent interview with Kee Thuan Chye, I asked how Malaysian literature in English could attain the potency and dynamism achieved by writers in the language in Singapore. His response sums up the contrary circumstances of English writers in the two countries:

Singapore respects literature in any language written by its citizens. By and large, Singapore upholds a meritocratic system. It nominates writers from across the language spectrum for its Cultural Medallion and for the SEA Write Award whereas here in Malaysia, you'd have to be writing in Malay to qualify to become a National Laureate or even be considered for the SEA Write Award, which is actually bestowed by an external body. In fact, year after year, the winning of the SEA Write Award by Malaysians has become a mockery. It's a case of the writers in Malay waiting their turn to be called.

Anger aside, which is fuelled by his "othering" for his choice of medium, Kee is making a point which has defined the literary scenario in the two countries. In Malaysia, there is a national language and, concomitantly, a national literature policy, and any writing that does not come within the purview of this state-authored, official policy is dismissed as being contrary to the nation building enterprise. But on the subject of language, Singapore chose to adopt the policy of "four official languages" - English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil - and allows literary activity to flourish in all these languages, without any concerted effort to either promote or to degrade any of them. Therefore, Singapore has seen several anthologies which have sought to bring together writings in all its languages, either in the original or in translation, so that inclusivity and harmonious co-existence could be enhanced between writers. As opposed to this, when Malaysia's National Laureate and a bilingual writer himself, Muhammad Haji Salleh, published an anthology of what he called *An Anthology of Contemporary Malaysian Literature* in 1988 (reprinted in 2008), he included only writings by Malay writers and in the Malay language, translated into English.

(The first part of this article appeared last week.)

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM, PH.D, IS PROFESSOR,

POETRY

Two poems from---

SYEDA ZAKIA AHSEN

Waiting . . .

Dawn, like the spring shower, is fast gone
And morning has embraced the day.

In my lonely moments I have waited
And heard songs of love and pining.

I have waited for you.

But then in the lonely woods
The birds went on singing their song.

In pain, morose and in loneliness.

Can anyone be more lonely, more in pain?

Can such a glamorous life be?

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